These are not quiet paintings. They are high-wire acts, equilibrium earned against Gaucher's self-imposed odds. The colours are improbable. Even more so are their side-by-side juxtapositions, which, taken by themselves, can verge on being weird. The compositions, especially **Vert, Brun, Bleu et Ochre**'s stack of four equally broad bands, can be bluntly simplistic. But the point, of course, is that no individual attributes of these paintings, nor any individual relationship, can be taken by itself. They cannot, in the usual way, be parsed into separate parts that, set against one another, add up to a whole. That is not how the paintings present themselves. Their internal tensions are powerful—we feel them in our bones—but their every part, their colours and their saturations, their weight, their geometric boundaries, and their spread across their immaculate flat surfaces are always utterly interdependent qualities, their measure punctiliously poised and irrevocably holistic.

This was not always Gaucher's way of working. In the early 1960s he had established an international reputation as a technically innovative printmaker. His culminating prints, the optically active relief-print series *Homage à Webern* from 1963, soon led to his colour-dazzling, jauntily kinetic, diamond-shaped *Square Dance* paintings, the closest he came to making Op Art as it flourished internationally at the time. By adopting uncompromised flatness and hard-edge geometry, he also joined the company of the Montreal Plasticiens, Guido Molinari and Claude Tousignant, whose painting was committed to pure colour. But their interests were not in colour conceived as a constant quality, but in how colour behaved and provoked the eye as it interacted with its neighbours. Their paintings were not fixed images, but rather events unfolding in time and in the world of the viewer. But where his fellow Plasticiens harboured a lingering penchant for near-primary colours, Gaucher's colours and their adjacencies would always be unpredictably idiosyncratic.

In his next series, which followed the *Square Dances,* Gaucher gradually shifted into a quieter mode of presentation, a disposition that would come to reign supreme in the extraordinary *Grey on Grey* series with which he completed the decade. (Elsewhere I have described its some sixty canvases as one of the grand achievements of postwar abstract painting.)[1] These paintings still operate on perceptual instability as the eye scans the relationships between the linear "signals" that Gaucher has dispersed across their grey monochrome surfaces, never allowing the eye resting points or resolutions. But they also retreat into a realm of discreet visibility, even the colour of the ground planes declared only subliminally, hardly visible in individual paintings, and discovered only when they are seen side by side. To commune with the *Grey*s is to enter a condition of prolonged irresolution, a sustained quiet presentness that transmutes into meditation. If we can call the art of Molinari and Tousignant secular because it performs within a world of objective colour relations, then, with the *Grey*s, Gaucher sets himself apart, for now and for the future, as a painter of transcendent experience, inviting us into meditative immersion, evoking the state of trance that he had long admired in the work of Rothko.

But by the end of 1969, Gaucher concluded that he had exhausted the possibilities of the *Grey*s. His art needed a rethink: "When you know how to make a painting and not make a mistake, something is wrong," he explained.[2] In 1970 he launched the *Colour Band* paintings, composed of stacked horizontal planes of colour, at first divided by white lines until finally, as in **Vert, Brun, Bleu et Ochre**, the colour bands abut directly. A challenge of the *Colour Bands* was to bring together on the same canvas the play between the several hues—those previously dispersed between individual paintings in the *Grey on Grey*s—while also capturing by the vertical interaction of the bands the rhythmic movement of *Grey*'s networks of signals. At first the bands are only subtly tinted greys, but soon the colours come forward until they assert themselves boldly. **Vert, Brun, Bleu et Ochre** takes another step. With its equally high, blunt bands, with its symmetry on

[1] Roald Nasgaard, *Abstract Painting in Canada,* Douglas & McIntyre, 2007, p. 198.

[2] Yves Gaucher, taped interview with Virgil Hammock, Nov. 18, 1973 Cited in Nasgaard, *Yves Gaucher: A Fifteen Year Perspective,* Art Gallery of Ontario, 1979, p. 83.

all axes, Gaucher halts any last vestiges of movement on the vertical axes, locking the whole unwaveringly into place.

This is a physically aggressive painting. Colours that should not marry well do so against their will. It is about balancing strained tensions with weights and measures of colour. It is a type of composing that the critic Joseph Mascheck, writing in *Art Forum* in April 1978, called "algebraic" because of "its requirements that a) successive moves be made, and b) these moves in turn be successively compensated for."[3] This meant that making the painting was a continual process of juggling its several variables, requiring continual reassessment and re- tuning to perfect that particular balance here of green, blue, brown or ochre.

To test himself, Gaucher would simultaneously work the same composition in several sizes, knowing that there was no predicting how a particular balance would play out when the size and exterior measurements were changed. Working horizontally, there was also the danger that particular colour juxtapositions could introduce an illusion of space, like a horizon line, and destroy the integrity of the painting surface. There are at least three different sized versions of **Vert, Brun, Bleu et Ochre**, our version here different from the others in that it inverts the order of the colours, with green at the bottom instead of the top, making it more susceptible to a naturalistic interpretation: a grassy slope, a sandy beach, leading to blue water. This is how, at the same time in Vancouver, Gordon Smith was composing his horizontally banded, Diebenkorn-inspired land/seascapes (see **West Coast #5,** 1975, Vancouver Art Gallery).

But if the Gaucher for the briefest second suggests a landscape, it is one that will never be. Even if the painting's equilibrium threatens to dissolve under internal pressures—it is this conscious risk of discord and breakup that keeps mind and body in suspense—its oneness remains intact. And this is the domain of his future work, and that of **Brun, Rouge, Gris,** 1983-84: not to stage sequential events but to construct a tense state of dynamic equilibrium. A next new complicating wrinkle will be the oblique angle.

Gaucher reintroduced the oblique into his work in 1976 as a complication to his *Colour Bands.* It had functioned as a crucial trajectory in the *Greys*, had gone underground in the *Colour Bands* and now re-emerged overtly. He explored it through the *Jericho* series (their broken triangles another conversation with Barnett Newman, like those earlier ones so important to both Tousignant and Molinari). The *Jerichos* concluded with several monumental canvases ablaze with fully saturated yellow and reds. But the predominant palette of the series and that of the work that followed was darker and hushed. In this context **Brun, Rouge, Gris** is a bracing surprise, a grand square-shouldered composition featuring a brashly assertive broad and searing central red plane, abutted by, contained by, a little pleasing brownish triangle on the left, with a sturdy upright grey column on the right. It is all, of course, invigorating with its competing expansive and constraining forces and its discordant chromas that finally, if paradoxically, attain their unlikely reconciliation.

Essential throughout, of course, was Gaucher's meticulous facture and his perfect surfaces. For Gaucher it is never a matter of what a painting is physically, but how it presents itself phenomenally, breaking free from its immediate material character, to escape gravity and seek the realm of the ethereal.

Roald Nasgaard, O.C., Ph.D.

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[3] Joseph Masheck, "Hard Core Painting," *Art Forum*, Apr. 1978, p. 53.